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Teaching children between the ages of 0-5 years old is just as valuable for society as is teaching children at the elementary and secondary levels. Early childhood is considered by experts in various but related fields to be a critical learning period. There is a large amount of research available that substantiates this fact. It is more than reasonable, based on the breadth of research in this area, to conclude that early childhood education warrants additional funding and support from the state.

The teaching staff within an early childhood learning environment have a critical influence on the children in their care. The quality of the teaching staff is reflected in the quality of the children's learning experiences and outcomes. Therefore developing and maintaining a quality teaching staff is a key component to providing a quality early childhood education.

I am a certified early childhood teacher and work with young toddlers at an accredited center in Portland. If it were not for my husband's substantially higher salary, I would not be able to support myself or my children with my current wages. Teachers in the prek-12 state funded educational system earn significantly more than educators teaching children 0-5 years old in unfunded programs. In addition, most early childhood educators are required to work all year verses pre-k to 12 teachers. The summer break provides these teachers with additional opportunities for income generation such as teaching summer school. The benefit packages awarded to those teaching for school districts is often much better than those provided by early childhood programs. Therefore, teachers working in early childhood that are not funded by the state have to spend more of their income on their healthcare and save more for retirement than teachers working for a school district. These realities further increase the income gap making the field of early childhood education less desirable as a career than working in elementary or secondary education.

Experience working with educators from varying educational and professional backgrounds over the years has shown me that education and training make a difference in the quality of an educator's teaching practices. I began my career prior to having a formal education in early childhood. While completing coursework in the field, my teaching practice improved dramatically. This bill will increase access to education and training which can only improve children's experiences in their care and learning environments.

Choosing to work with the youngest of our community's children comes with the risk of an inability to be financially independent. Working with this age group can be both physically and emotionally demanding, and the hours are long. However working with this age group has an immeasurable amount of non-monetary rewards. Sometimes we see children take their first step, say their first word, or make their first friend. We see children overcome barriers and obstacles, and find joy in assisting them reach their potentials. This bill will help make the field of early childhood education a viable career path. It also will help maintain and increase the number of quality teachers practicing in the field. By passing this bill you will improve the quality of Maine's early childhood educational programs, therefore making a positive difference for Maine's young children. Please pass this bill.